



Earthquake in Haiti
Kleist and Modern Disaster Discourse

Holm, Isak Winkel

Published in:
New German Critique

Publication date:
2012

Document version
Early version, also known as pre-print

Citation for published version (APA):
Holm, I. W. (2012). Earthquake in Haiti: Kleist and Modern Disaster Discourse. *New German Critique*, (115), 49-66.

Earthquake in Haiti: Kleist and the Birth of Modern Disaster Discourse

Isak Winkel Holm

To a literary scholar, the earthquake in Haiti in January 2010 reads like a tragic repetition of Heinrich von Kleist's "Earthquake in Chile" (1806). In Kleist's short story about the earthquake in Santiago in 1647, the disaster causes a disintegration of the social order: the viceroy's palace has collapsed, the archbishop's mangled body is found, the courthouse is in flames, and in place of the main character's father's house, "there was now a seething lake from which reddish vapours were rising."¹ In the real-life earthquake in Port-au-Prince, the disaster caused a breakdown of modern political authority: the government building, the police station, and the prison known as Titanic collapsed, along with a host of local United Nations headquarters and other organizations. In both cases, the postdisaster institutional void made room for rape and looting but also for spontaneous acts of altruism.

Is this analogy between a fictional and a factual earthquake in America merely anecdotal? What is the use of comparing the real-life disaster in Haiti with the literary disaster in Chile—other than for the odd instance of trying to convey a sense of dramatic reality to sleepy undergrads in a German department? This is in fact a fundamental question for the study of disaster

1. Heinrich von Kleist, "The Earthquake in Chile," in *The Marquise of O—and Other Stories*, trans. David Luke and Nigel Reeves (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1978), 56. Hereafter cited as EC.

fiction. After the 1755 earthquake in Lisbon, Western culture has been flooded with disasters in poems, novels, short stories, operas, cartoons, movies, computer games, and the like. What role does this tsunami of fictional disasters play in the way we cope with factual disasters? I argue that fictional disasters play a decisive role by contributing to our collective imagination of disaster and, thereby, shaping how we think and act when confronted with real disasters or somewhat real threats of disasters. In the words of Slavoj Žižek, disasters have a “fictional presence on TV and theatre screens” long before they happen in real life.² Hence disaster fiction is important as testing ground rather than as testimony: fiction is not just a way to represent the hard facts of disaster but, first and foremost, a way to reveal and rework the cultural framework through which we perceive disaster.

On January 19, 2010, the French newspaper *Libération* published a section in which eight prominent Haitian writers explain how they perceived the quake one week earlier.³ The recurring question in this collection of short texts is how the citizens of Port-au-Prince conducted themselves after the breakdown of legal and political authorities. Skeptical of the international media's standardized coverage of looting and social chaos, the Haitian writers printed in *Libération* stress that the citizens of Port-au-Prince were in fact capable of dealing with the disaster because of their “spontaneous solidarity,” “luminous creativity,” “prerequisite dignity,” and “priceless vitality.” In the vocabulary of modern disaster research, the Haitian writers address the question of the vulnerability or resilience of the community of Port-au-Prince. To quote an influential definition, *vulnerability* refers to “the characteristics of a person or group and their situation that influence their capacity to anticipate, cope with, resist and recover from the impact of a natural hazard.”⁴ By contrast, the antonym *resilience*, in the words of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, can be defined as “the ability of a social or ecological system to absorb disturbances while retaining the same basic structure and ways of functioning, the capacity for self-organisation, and the capacity to adapt to stress and change.”⁵

2. Slavoj Žižek, “Some Politically Incorrect Reflections on Violence in France and Related Matters. 3. Escape from New Orleans,” *lacan.com* (2005), www.lacan.com/zizfrance2.htm.

3. Louis-Philippe Dalembert et al., “Les auteurs haïtiens témoignent,” *Libération*, January 19, 2010.

4. Benjamin Wisner, *At Risk: Natural Hazards, People's Vulnerability, and Disasters*, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 2004), 11.

5. M. L. Parry et al., eds., *Contribution of Working Group II to the Fourth Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 880. This work can also be found at www.ipcc.ch.

When sociological disaster scholars study vulnerability and resilience, they do not view the disaster as an external event—as, for instance, an earthquake, a hurricane, or a spill of hazardous materials—that has a certain impact on human society. Instead, they focus on society's contribution to disaster, or at least to the severity and duration of disaster. What is at stake are the “predisaster conditions” determining how a given society is able or unable to cope with disaster.⁶ From the perspective of vulnerability, disaster is always already present as a latent problem: only a tiny push is needed to trigger a manifest calamity.

Like New Orleans, Haiti was a worst-case scenario of disaster vulnerability. A recent World Bank country study, *Social Resilience and State Fragility in Haiti* (2007), maps the severe malfunctioning of Haiti's educational, health care, legal, political, and other systems. Haiti's institutional void, the proverbial *vide institutionnel*, was not created by the earthquake; it was there already as an inherent weakness in Haitian society, the World Bank study documents.⁷ To name but one example, Haiti had one of the most numerically weak and disorganized police forces in the world even before the quake. Evidently, the World Bank study, like any other social sciences study, describes vulnerability and resilience in terms of quantifiable demographic and socio-economic factors, such as the number of police officers per hundred thousand citizens or the percentage of primary school enrollment. But once in a while, even social scientists mention a kind of vulnerability and resilience that is not as easily quantifiable. If the “weakness of institutional capacities in Haiti” is an important problem, the World Bank study argues, it is because in modern, urbanized Haiti “the robust social cohesion that has characterized the countryside becomes less effective.”⁸

The Haitian writers from *Libération* discuss vulnerability and resilience on this deeper level. Unconcerned with the manifold weaknesses of Haitian state institutions, they imagine a more fundamental robustness of Haitian society. This robustness pertains to another level of social order emerging after the breakdown of the legal and political order, a kind of vital social substance in *le vide institutionnel*. The problem is, however, that vulnerability and resilience on this deeper level are difficult to represent in television images and in social science studies. “Ce qu'on ne peut pas voir, c'est la solidarité,” according to

6. Anthony Oliver-Smith and Susannah M. Hoffman, *The Angry Earth: Disaster in Anthropological Perspective* (New York: Routledge, 1999), 4.

7. Dorte Verner and Willy Egset, *Social Resilience and State Fragility in Haiti* (Washington, DC: World Bank, 2007), 52.

8. *Ibid.*, 48, 42.

Louis-Philippe Dalember, one of the Haitian writers: what cannot be seen is the spontaneous solidarity among the Port-au-Prince citizens after the earthquake. To express their social imagination of the invisible Haitian resilience, Dalember and the other writers narrate vignettes of solidarity and civic virtue in the ruins: somebody helping a stranger trapped in a collapsed house, somebody carrying a person piggyback, somebody offering rice and oil and pasta to strangers, and so on.

This kind of narrative abounds in an important branch of Western disaster fiction that focuses not so much on disaster itself as on the fragility or robustness of human society when hit by disaster. Whereas the theoretical discussion of vulnerability and resilience is relatively recent, the social imagination of vulnerable human societies has been explored for centuries by disaster fiction.⁹ To name but a few examples, the question of disaster vulnerability and resilience is raised in Richard Wagner's *Twilight of the Gods*, in José Saramago's *Blindness*, and in Cormac McCarthy's *Road*, not to mention the recent spate of postapocalyptic movies. In this subgenre of disaster fiction—which could be labeled vulnerability fiction—Western culture tries to imagine the fundamental workings of sociality through narratives about society's response to disaster.

I propose the term *disaster discourse* for the ensemble of cultural forms—cognitive schemata, scientific concepts, narrative plots, metaphorical images, rhetorical questions, and other devices—that frame how we see disasters and how we remain blind to them. What interests me in this article is the subset of disaster discourse that determines how we think and talk about disaster vulnerability and resilience. In a recent book Judith Butler reminds us that vulnerability should be seen as a discursive fact rather than an objective fact “out there.” How we imagine our own vulnerability—and, importantly, how we react to it politically—is shaped by “the normative schemes of intelligibility” that determine what we mean by human and by society.¹⁰ Thus, to rephrase my main argument about the importance of disaster fiction: it is not so much that this kind of fiction represents the sociological facts of disaster vulnerability and resilience as that it reveals the discursive schemes we use to address the question.

9. I am using the concept of social imagination as a name for the “socially shared ways in which social spaces are imagined” (Charles Taylor, *Modern Social Imaginaries* [Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004], 23).

10. See Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (New York: Verso, 2004), 146. Butler's focus is the “corporeal vulnerability” of the individual subject, whereas the focus of modern disaster research is the *systemic* vulnerability of a whole society or social group. Nevertheless, her insights into the discursive formation of vulnerability are relevant.

Vulnerable Santiago

In the vocabulary of modern disaster research, Kleist's famous story is a tale of vulnerability. The two young lovers of the story, Josefa, a daughter from a rich house, and Jéronimo, her house teacher, have defied Josefa's patriarch father and conceived a child. When the ground starts trembling, Josefa is on her way to the scaffold to be beheaded, and Jéronimo is trying to hang himself in his prison cell. They both escape in the midst of chaos as the houses of Santiago come crashing down, the Machopo river overflows its banks, and the greater part of the city bursts into fire. Whereas the story's first part focuses on what nature does to human beings, the two subsequent parts focus on what human beings do to each other. In part 2 Jéronimo is reunited with Josefa and their newborn child in a valley outside Santiago. The young family becomes friends with another little family made up of the young nobleman Don Fernando, his wife and child, his two sisters-in-law, and their father. Human sociality in this idyllic valley is characterized by a Rousseauesque harmony in which altruistic earthquake survivors help each other regardless of social and economical standing. Part 3 takes place the day after the quake, where the citizens of Santiago gather in a Dominican church, the only church still standing. A fanatical priest interprets the earthquake as a divine punishment and singles out Josefa and Jéronimo as the sinners who have called down the wrath of God. The agitated crowd immediately attacks the two young families, and, after a series of random misapprehensions and misunderstandings, Josefa and Jéronimo are killed along with Don Fernando's newborn son and one of his sisters-in-law.

Remarkably, the short story shifts its perspective from nature to society. Josefa and Jéronimo survive the natural disaster but succumb to the social disaster in the church. Thus the central question is not about nature but about society, made urgent by the stark contrast of the euphoric image of sociality in the valley against the dysphoric image of sociality in the church. This is a matter that implies emotions as well as rational arguments. When Josefa and Jéronimo experience the harmonious sociality in the valley, they start wondering if they could stay in Chile after all. The English translation reads: “In the minds of Jéronimo and Josefa strange thoughts began to stir” (EC, 52), but in the German text, their thoughts stir in their breast, not in their mind. The next morning, as the young couple leaves the valley in the company of their new friends, this question is debated again: “Someone in Don Fernando's party raised the question of whether they too should not participate in this solemnity and join the general procession” (EC, 61). Immediately and for the next page and a half, the narrative slows. One side of the debate is held by Don Fernando's sister-in-law, Doña Isabel, who fears the future events in the church. Once again, the question of postdisaster vulnerability is affective rather than rational: Doña Isabel is

unaware of what kind of unhappy presentiment that urges her to hold them back. The other side is taken by Don Fernando and the other members of the two families, who have all been made slightly euphoric by the social harmony in the valley. They trust the solidarity of postdisaster sociality and have no fears about joining "the general procession."

Obviously, the short story's central question of disaster vulnerability is similar to the question raised by the Haitian writers in *Libération*. In both cases, disaster vulnerability and resilience are discussed on a deeper level. What is at stake is the weakness not of a society's institutional but of its moral infrastructure. When vulnerable houses and institutions collapse, it is still up in the air whether the ties of the human community are fragile or robust. Kleist's story offers no unequivocal answer to this question. Rather, it explores how the fictional characters imagine social vulnerability. To some degree, this is what all Kleist's literary works do, and sometimes they even evoke the concept of vulnerability while doing it. In the short story "Michael Kohlhaas," for instance, the title character does not trust his otherwise reliable groom, because Kohlhaas has a "realistic sense of the imperfection inherent in the order of the world" (EC, 121) or, in a more literal translation, of "the frail organization of the world" (der gebrechlichen Einrichtung der Welt). In the last act of *Penthesilea*, the whole world is, without further ado, characterized as "die gebrechliche."¹¹

What singles out "The Earthquake in Chile" from the rest of Kleist's literary work is that it frames the social imagination of vulnerability and resilience in the concepts and images of disaster discourse. The story of Josefa and Jerónimo is not just a story of vulnerability; it is one of disaster vulnerability. The imagination of vulnerable Santiago is governed by the concepts of theodicy, the sublime, and the state of emergency, three core concepts of eighteenth-century disaster discourse. It is not so much that these are theoretical concepts as that they function as metaphorical models structuring the social imagination of vulnerability. In the following three sections I explore how Kleist uses each of these cognitive schemes of disaster discourse—or, in the vocabulary of Ernst Cassirer, these three symbolic forms—to make disaster vulnerability and resilience imaginable.

Theodicy

As symbolic form, theodicy is a metaphorical image of a court of justice. Perceived through this cognitive schema, disaster turns into a legal process negotiating the justness of God—or the justness of some other entity that can

be held responsible for the entire world or the entire society. The symbolic form of theodicy became an indispensable part of disaster discourse after the first modern disaster, the 1755 earthquake in Lisbon. The cultural shockwaves of this famous quake vitalized the artificial word *theodicy*, recently coined by the German philosopher Gottfried Leibniz by combining *theos* and *dike*, the Greek words for "God" and "justice." *Si Deus est, unde malum?* If God is almighty and good, how can the world be full of evil and meaningless events like earthquakes? One side of the theodicy debate was taken by traditional Christians, according to whom the earthquake was a just punishment of the godless citizens of Lisbon. This well-known explanation of the earthquake was given in most European churches in the winter 1755–56.¹² In Kleist's story, the priest in the Dominican church hews to it as well. On that same side of the debate, one also found enlightened theist philosophers who, like Leibniz, assured their audiences that some kind of rational providential order lay behind apparently disorderly events like earthquakes and thus that this world was the best of all possible worlds. On the other side of the debate was, first of all, Voltaire, who wrote his poem on Lisbon only a couple of weeks after the quake and who made fun of the optimistic Leibniz in his satirical novel *Candide* (1759). As Voltaire wrote in a letter, his Lisbon poem was "a kick in the rear of Providence."¹³ According to Voltaire, no meaningful order lay behind the tragic events in Lisbon, neither as punishment nor as rationality, only the crazy contingencies of the natural disaster.

Provoked by Voltaire's poem, Jean-Jacques Rousseau wrote a letter to Voltaire in which he struggled to find a middle position between the two sides of the theodicy debate. He wanted to defend the concept of Providence against Voltaire's attack, but he did not want to defend Providence simply by blaming the citizens of Lisbon, as the traditional Christians did. In his effort to solve this problem, Rousseau stumbled on the concept of vulnerability:

The majority of our physical misfortunes are also our work. Without leaving your Lisbon subject, concede, for example, that it was hardly nature that there brought together twenty-thousand houses of six or seven stories. If the residents of this large city had been more evenly dispersed and less densely housed, the losses would have been fewer or perhaps none at all. Everyone would have fled at the first shock.¹⁴

12. See T. D. Kendrick, *The Lisbon Earthquake* (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1957).

13. Henri Gouhier, *Rousseau et Voltaire* (Paris: Vrin, 1983), 76.

14. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Oeuvres complètes*, ed. Bernard Gagnebin and Marcel Raymond, vol. 4 (Paris: Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, 1964), 1061.

11. Heinrich von Kleist, *Werke und Briefe* (Berlin: Aufbau, 1995), 113.

Rousseau defends Providence by claiming that the sufferings of the citizens of Lisbon are not accidental. There is, indeed, an order behind the apparent chaos—but this order is social rather than theological. The residents of Lisbon have themselves contributed to the disaster, not by being vile sinners but simply by building tall houses too close to each other. As Susan Neiman writes in her brilliant history of the theodicy debate, *Evil in Modern Thought* (2002), Rousseau defends God so well that God himself is made superfluous.¹⁵ This radical change of perspective rotates the whole theodicy debate from the vertical to the horizontal. Before Rousseau, there was only a vertical theodicy, arguing the pros and cons of a metaphysical order behind the contingencies of the finite world. By horizontalizing theodicy, Rousseau turned it into a cultural tool for the social imagination, raising the question of a non-metaphysical order behind the sufferings of human beings. This secularized theodicy soon played a major role in German philosophy of history¹⁶ and, later, in modern disaster discourse.¹⁷

Kleist was familiar with the theodicy debate, primarily because Voltaire, Rousseau, and Immanuel Kant were important figures in his intellectual life. Although “The Earthquake in Chile” takes place in Santiago, the fictional disaster itself is strikingly similar to the famous Lisbon earthquake in 1755.¹⁸ Accordingly, the default theodicy motifs from Voltaire’s poem and from *Candide* are found in Kleist’s story: the death of the innocent child, the death of the just person, and the explicit question of God’s justice.¹⁹ Yet the theodicy debate

is not just present as an ornamental sample of theodicy motifs. As a symbolic form, framing disaster as a court of justice, theodicy raises a question of the relationship between order and chaos, between Providence and accident. It is indeed possible to read the short story as an argument for the existence of a meaningful and just order behind the contingencies of disaster. According to this reading, disaster is a divine court of justice violently correcting an unjust human order. Josefa and Jeronimo are judged harshly by the archbishop, the viceroy, and Josefa’s father, and these authority figures seem to be punished by the earthquake. In this vein, the two lovers interpret the disaster as a “mercy” that the heaven has bestowed on them (EC, 59). It is, however, equally possible to read the story as a deconstruction of precisely this dream of a meaningful order behind chaos. Josefa’s abbess heroically saves the newborn Felipe only to be ignominiously struck dead, with all her nuns, by a falling gable (EC, 56), whereas Master Pedrillo, the bloodthirsty leader of the killings in the church, survives. Judging from these events, there is no meaningful order behind the blind contingencies of the earthquake.

This is, roughly speaking, how German studies has discussed “The Earthquake of Chile” for more than fifty years. Whereas older readings tend to interpret the story as a classical theodicy revealing a deep order of meaning behind chaos, recent readings interpret it as a Voltairean kick in the rear of Providence. I argue that both readings are problematic, since they do not take into consideration the concept of vulnerability. It is crucial that the story shifts its perspective from nature to society. The first part raises the question of a metaphysical order that, in Kleist’s time, was known as Providence and divine justice. In this perspective, the symbolic form of theodicy is used in its classical vertical sense, as, for instance, when Jeronimo thanks God for his miraculous escape (EC, 54). Yet the second and third parts raise the question of a nonmetaphysical order in the society of Santiago.

With this shift of perspective, Kleist horizontalizes the symbolic form of theodicy. As the German historian of philosophy Hans Blumenberg points out, the secularization of theological motives is a matter of form rather than content.²⁰ The Rousseauesque secularization of the theodicy debate clears the classical theodicy motives of their original theological content and transforms them into empty cultural forms. Similarly, Kleist’s horizontal, secularized version of theodicy makes it possible to imagine the disaster vulnerability and resilience of human society. The contrast between a vertical and horizontal

15. Susan Neiman, *Evil in Modern Thought: An Alternative History of Philosophy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2002), 55.

16. See, e.g., Odo Marquard, “Schwierigkeiten beim Ja-Sagen,” in *Theodizee—Gott vor Gericht?*, ed. Willi Oelmüller (Munich: Fink, 1992).

17. Russell R. Dynes, “The Dialogue between Voltaire and Rousseau on the Lisbon Earthquake: The Emergence of a Social Science View,” *International Journal of Mass Emergencies and Disasters* 18, no. 1 (2000): 97–115.

18. The comparison of the fictional earthquake in Santiago and the factual earthquake in Lisbon is made by T. E. Bourke, “Vorsehung und Katastrophe: Voltaire’s *Poème sur le désastre de Lisbonne* und Kleist’s *Erdbeben in Chili*,” in *Klassik und Moderne: Die Weimarer Klassik als historisches Ereignis und Herausforderung im kulturgeschichtlichen Prozess*; Walter Müller-Seidel zum 65. Geburtstag, ed. Walter Müller-Seidel, Karl Richter, and Jörg Schönert (Stuttgart: Metzler, 1983), 228–53. In both calamities, a city is destroyed by three elements of nature: trembling earth, rising water, and fire.

19. There are indeed striking parallels between “The Earthquake in Chile” and Voltaire’s *Candide*: both narratives tell the story of a forbidden love between the daughter of a noble house and her house teacher, who are expelled from the house and wind up in an earthquake. See Werner Hamacher, “Das Beben der Darstellung,” in *Positionen der Literaturwissenschaft: Acht Modellanalysen am Beispiel von Kleist’s “Das Erdbeben in Chili”*, ed. David E. Wellbery (Munich: Beck, 1985), 149–92.

20. See Hans Blumenberg, *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1983).

dimension surfaces in the body language of the fictional characters. During his escape from the city, Jérónimo sees a man “speechlessly extending his trembling hands to heaven” (EC, 53); likewise, during his Christian hate speech, the priest raises “his trembling hands high up to heaven, with the wide folds of his surplice flowing around them” (EC, 63). In contrast, the social interaction between Josefa and Jérónimo and their postdisaster friends is characterized by horizontal gestures in which food is handed back and forth between human beings, and babies are put to the breast. In a literal translation, the people of the paradisaical valley are handing each other help (“wechselseitig Hülfe reichen” [EC, 60]). The vertical version of theodicy questions the arms extended toward God, whereas the horizontal version questions the arms handing things back and forth between human beings.²¹

According to both the vertical and the horizontal versions of theodicy, however, the underlying order is made out of goodness, be it the imponderable goodness of God or the vulnerable goodness of humans. In the valley, the horizontal human goodness, “die Güte,” is first of all a feminine thing that has to do with nursing, feeding, and bodily care. It is no accident that the young lovers plan to escape to Josefa’s female relatives in the city with the feminine name La Concepción and from there to Jérónimo’s female relatives in Spain. Thus the question raised by the symbolic form of theodicy, in its horizontal version, is answered by an affect: the immediate and, perhaps, robust feelings of love and compassion among human beings.

The Sublime

As symbolic form, the sublime is a metaphorical image of an overwhelming sense-experience. When we perceive disaster through this cultural model, we focus on its violent impact on the observer who, stricken with terrified dumbness and bodily stupor, experiences a masochistic blend of pain and pleasure. In *On the Sublime* the Roman rhetorician Longinus (or Pseudo-Longinus) writes about the violent sight of the erupting volcano Etna. Eighteenth-century aesthetic theory, in which the symbolic form of the sublime was developed, used natural disasters as default examples of the sublime sense-experience. Kant’s chapter on “the sublime” (*das Erhabene*) from *Critique of the Power of Judgment* (1790) is a systematized sum of the eighteenth-century theory of the sublime—as well as one of the most famous pieces of disaster discourse of the

century. According to Kant, the sublime experience is triggered by nature “in its chaos” and “in its wildest and most unruly disorder and devastation.”²² As a high school student, Kant had published two articles on the Lisbon disaster, but the older Kant mentions the earthquake only once among his multitude of examples of “raw nature” (CJ, 136). Yet Kant describes the sublime mode of sense experience as a “vibration” or a “trembling” (*Erschütterung*): the sublime movement in the mind “(especially in its inception) may be compared to a vibration” (CJ, 141).

The *Critique* gives a characteristic Kantian twist to the theory of the sublime. What deserves to be called sublime is not the “shapeless mountain masses towering above one another in wild disorder with their pyramids of ice, or the dark and raging sea” (CJ, 139). What really is sublime, on the contrary, is the human being’s own capacity for morality. We cannot grasp what we see when we face overwhelming phenomena of nature, yet our respect “for the idea of humanity in our subject” awakens in us as a kind of counterforce (CJ, 141). In the vocabulary of this article, then, Kant’s theory of the sublime is a theory of disaster resilience. A human being’s “capacity for resistance,” that is, its resilience, is sublime (CJ, 145). When confronted by the obstacles of nature, we have a “power of the mind to soar above certain obstacles” (CJ, 154), thanks to our “unmistakeable and inextinguishable idea of morality” (CJ, 156).

Kleist’s meticulous description of Josefa’s and Jérónimo’s sense experience of the earthquake is in line with the eighteenth-century theory of the sublime. The raw elements of nature give an “appalling impression” stamping itself on Jérónimo’s mind (EC, 54; trans. modified). In the first moments after the quake, he is “rigid with horror”; later he escapes through Santiago “trembling, his hair on end, his knees nearly giving away” (EC, 53). Likewise Josefa starts trembling and nearly faints when confronted with the horrible sight. And when the survivors meet in the valley outside Santiago and tell each other little stories of postdisaster heroism and solidarity, the narrator invokes the ambivalent blend of pain and pleasure, a central feature of the theory of the sublime: “The sorrow in every heart was mingled with . . . much sweetness and delight” (EC, 60).

Kant’s chapter on the sublime was famous, but his turn from the objective to the subjective, from terror to respect, did not have many followers in the cultural history of the sublime. As it seems, however, Kleist was inspired by the specifically Kantian version of the sublime. Kant writes about thunderclouds,

21. Jochen Schmidt has explored this motif, without, however, connecting it to the underlying theodicy debate (*Heinrich von Kleist: Die Dramen und Erzählungen in ihrer Epoche* [Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 2003], 192).

22. Immanuel Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, trans. Paul Guyer (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 130; hereafter cited as CJ.

oceans, volcanoes “with their all-destroying violence” (“in ihrer ganzen zerstörenden Gewalt” [CJ, 144]); Kleist uses the same phrasing when he describes the earthquake in Santiago in all its “destructive fury of nature” (zerstörende Gewalt der Natur [EC, 54]). And just like Kant, Kleist focuses on a sublime spiritual power in the subject rising after the material breakdown. Indeed, the narrator of the earthquake story uses a very Kantian figure to describe the free sociality of the paradisaical valley: “And indeed, in the midst of this horrifying time in which all the earthly possessions of men were perishing and all nature was in danger of being engulfed, the human spirit itself seemed to unfold like the fairest of flowers” (EC, 60).

I suggest reading Kleist’s flower of the human spirit as a version of Kant’s “idea of humanity” rising in the sublime experience. To understand what Kant means by the “unmistakeable and inextinguishable idea of morality,” we must keep in mind that he refers to the idea of morality as a whole. Respecting moral law means not so much respecting a contingent historical ensemble of moral rules as respecting the fundamental “predisposition for morality in us” (CJ, 156). It is a characteristic feature in Kant’s ethical theory that he focuses mainly on the grounding of the moral and political order of society, and less on specific ethical ideas. According to Kant, this fundament is made out of *Achtung* (respect). The sublime experience is a wake-up call for the respect for the idea of humanity in our subject, and in this context “humanity” is not a designation for all members of the human race but a *terminus technicus* referring to the free capacity of reason. A human being is disaster resilient, then, insofar as it acknowledges itself and others as subjects of reasonable acts and valorizations and not just as playthings for external powers.

Like Kant, Kleist turns the sublime into a question of respect. When the survivors meet in the valley, they tell each other stories of civic virtue and *Achtung* in the ruins:

Instead of the usual trivial tea-table gossip about the ways of the world, everyone was now telling stories of extraordinary heroic deeds. Persons hitherto held to be of little consequence in society had shown a Roman greatness of character; there were countless instances of fearlessness, of magnanimous contempt of danger, of self-denial and superhuman self-sacrifice, of life unhesitatingly cast away as if it were the most trifling of possessions and could be recovered a moment later. (EC, 60)

Le vide institutionnel of postdisaster Santiago witnesses the emergence of a more robust social order, based on an alternative distribution of social respect. Persons who were not respected in predisaster society suddenly show “Roman

greatness” (*Römergröße*), presumably a kind of republican virtue that disregards private interests in favor of the common good.

I suggest that we read the motif of the sublime in Kleist’s story as another symbolic form setting the frame for imagining disaster vulnerability and resilience. To be sure, the symbolic form of the sublime is closely related to the symbolic form of theodicy,²³ but still, there is a difference of nuance between these two cognitive schemes. Whereas the horizontalized version of theodicy raises a question of whether human beings are good to each other, the moral version of the sublime raises a question of whether human beings respect each other. In the earthquake story, goodness is found in a feminine universe, while respect is situated in a masculine realm. The two Prussians, Kant and Kleist, praise martial virtues like bravery, heroism, and sangfroid. Even if the two symbolic forms are, in many ways, analogues, a considerable difference exists between a social order in which the ties are made out of affects, such as love and compassion, and social order based on mutual respect for each other as autonomous citizens.

State of Emergency

Finally, the state of emergency as a symbolic form is a metaphorical image of social collapse. Perceived through this cognitive scheme, disaster becomes understandable as a breakdown of social order. This symbolic form was developed in the theory of the state, dating back to Roman law. According to the Roman constitution, the Senate could, in cases of emergency such as invasions or natural disasters, make the consuls appoint a dictator, who would then have unconstrained sovereignty for up to six months. During the French Revolution, this kind of temporary suspension of the constitutional order was formalized as an *état de siège*.²⁴ In the legal vacuum of the state of emergency, in which the rights and legal processes of the normal state are suspended, the authorities are given more or less free rein to reestablish the necessary preconditions for a legal order.

23. This close relation becomes clear when you compare the chapter on the sublime from the *Critique* with Kant’s short text on theodicy from the same year, “On the Miscarriage of All Philosophical Trials in Theodicy,” in Kant, *Religion and Rational Theology*, ed. Allan W. Wood, trans. Allan W. Wood and George di Giovanni (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 19–38.

24. For recent introductions to the state of emergency, see John Ferejohn and Pasquale Pasquino, “The Law of Exception: A Typology of Emergency Powers,” *International Journal of Constitutional Law* 2, no. 2 (2004): 210–39; Giorgio Agamben, *State of Exception*, trans. Kevin Attell (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005); Nomi Claire Lazar, *State of Emergency in Liberal Democracies* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009); and Bonnie Honig, *Emergency Politics: Paradox, Law, Democracy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009).

Kleist had a law degree, and in the years before he published "The Earthquake in Chile," he trained to become a civil servant for the Prussian state apparatus. His works and letters demonstrate a comprehensive knowledge of the theory of the state. Even if the concept of the state of emergency was new at the time, Kleist was familiar with more or less overlapping concepts, such as right of necessity (*Notrecht*), martial law (*Kriegsrecht*), and state of nature. Under the Napoleonic occupation of Germany in 1809, he even published the pamphlet *Über die Rettung von Österreich (On the Salvation of Austria)*, in which he urged the Hapsburg king Franz to declare a provisional state of emergency in order for him to act as an unconstrained sovereign.²⁵ The cultural motifs of the state of emergency abound in the earthquake story: the wild crowd of people, the draconian laws, and, emblematically, the "club" (*Keule*) used to kill Josefa and Jérónimo in the church (EC, 66), implying that human society has regressed to a precivilized state. When the viceroy's guard tries to clear the people out of a church right after the quake, the guard is told "that there was no longer any Viceroy of Chile" (EC, 59). While disaster creates a temporary *vide institutionnel* in Chilean society, however, this legal void should not be confused with a total collapse of social order. Even in the worst moments of disaster, a residue of social order remains. As the narrator explains, the viceroy has not disappeared; he has just "been obliged to have gallows erected to deter looters" (EC, 59). In the same vein, the killings in the Dominican church are not sheer anarchy but some kind of primitive and dysfunctional trial in which Josefa and Jérónimo are found guilty and executed. The violence of the lynch mob is not the product of a wild social disorder; on the contrary, it stems from a wild desire to reestablish social order.²⁶

One of the more enigmatic characters in the story is a "naval officer of high rank" who shows up just as the maddened crowd is about to stone Josefa and Jérónimo (EC, 65). Don Fernando urges the officer to take the young couple in protective custody, but he hesitates and disappears out of the story while the killings take place. Afterward, when it is too late, the officer returns and confesses to Don Fernando that he "keenly regretted" his "own inaction during this terrible incident" (EC, 67). This curious inaction of the naval officer in the church cannot be described as a state of emergency proper. No suspension of rights and legal processes for all of Chilean society, it designates instead a local and contained space devoid of law. In this miniature state of emergency, Josefa and Jérónimo are not just "godless sinners" (EC,

62), as the priest and later a voice from the lynch mob label them; they are also rightless: they no longer have status as full members of the human community. In the words of Michael Kohlhaas, they are "denied the protection of the law." According to Kohlhaas, the Saxon authorities have driven him "out into the wilderness among savages" and have put the "club" into his hands with which he is forced to defend himself (EC, 152). In present-day words, Josefa and Jérónimo as well as Kohlhaas fall into a legal black hole. Guantánamo Bay and the prisons of the South African apartheid system are well-known examples of this kind of state of emergency *en miniature*, a juridically produced void in the legal system in which authorities are free to act unconstrained by the rule of law.²⁷

I suggest interpreting the motif of the state of emergency (and of the legal black hole) as the third symbolic form that gives shape to the short story's social imagination of disaster vulnerability and resilience. Perceived through this cognitive scheme, vulnerability takes on the form of injustice: an order of justice that is not entirely absent but is cut through with black holes in which human beings fall outside the reach of law.

To sum up, three important symbolic forms of eighteenth-century disaster discourse play a role in Kleist's story. I have elaborated in some philological detail to sketch the intellectual contexts of these cultural models. Yet the important thing is not content but form. The concepts of theodicy, the sublime, and the state of emergency have their historical origins in theology, aesthetics, and theory of the state, respectively. In the earthquake story, however, the concepts function not as philosophical substance but as empty cultural forms. These three symbolic forms frame the social imagination of disaster vulnerability and resilience on three levels. When theodicy is used as a cognitive schema, the question is whether human community deep down is held together by love and compassion. When the sublime is used as schema, the question is about respect as a basis for sociality. Finally, when the state of emergency functions as a model, the question addresses the robustness of the legal ties of society.

Disaster Discourse

The eight Haitian writers published their contributions to *Libération* one week after the earthquake. Still in shock, they put together short essays to cope with the disaster taking place all around them. In this case, disaster discourse is more than just a discursive practice *about* a disaster; it is also a discursive

25. Kleist, *Werke und Briefe*, 53.

26. This point has been illuminated by Susanne Kaul, *Poetik der Gerechtigkeit: Shakespeare-Kleist* (Munich: Fink, 2008), 106.

27. David Dyzenhaus, *The Constitution of Law: Legality in a Time of Emergency* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 202.

practice *within* a disaster. It is a way to act discursively in a disaster situation—by explaining, urging, soothing, arguing, mobilizing, criticizing, and so on. The contribution of disaster discourse to the social and cultural construction of disaster became horribly clear when Hurricane Katrina made landfall on August 29, 2005. While New Orleans was still underwater, the American public perceived the disaster through the symbolic form of the state of emergency. On September 3 even the *New York Times* confirmed this image: “America is once more plunged into a snake pit of anarchy, death, looting, raping, marauding thugs, suffering innocents, a shattered infrastructure, a gutted police force, insufficient troop levels and criminally negligent government planning.”²⁸ As the water receded a week later, however, it appeared that the media’s images of a collapsing civilization were fictitious: there were no piles of body bags, no documentation to back the stories of babies taken from their parents’ arms and raped. According to the prominent disaster researcher Kathleen Tierney, the media’s images of disaster played an important role in the authorities’ poor disaster management:

Initial evidence suggests that the media’s relentless adherence to disaster myths and to frames emphasizing civil unrest and urban insurgency, along with the strategic response measures these reports justified, had a number of immediate negative consequences. . . . Distorted images disseminated by the media and public officials served to justify calls for greater military involvement in disasters.²⁹

The quote is taken from Tierney’s first paper on Katrina, written with Christine Bevc and Erica Kuligowski and published only six months after the hurricane under the title “Metaphors Matter: Disaster Myths, Media Frames, and Their Consequences in Hurricane Katrina.” The images circulated by American media were *metaphors* because they built on a fundamental metaphorical transport from war to disaster; Katrina was not a war, but it was seen *as* war and insurgency.³⁰ Nonetheless, these distorting metaphors mattered,

28. Maureen Dowd, “United States of Shame,” *New York Times*, September 3, 2005, www.nytimes.com/2005/09/03/opinion/03dowd.html.

29. See, e.g., Kathleen Tierney, Christine Bevc, and Erica Kuligowski, “Metaphors Matter: Disaster Myths, Media Frames, and Their Consequences in Hurricane Katrina,” *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 604, no. 1 (2006): 57–81.

30. Here I recycle the title of a later paper by Kathleen Tierney and Christine Bevc, “Disaster as War: Militarism and the Social Construction of Disaster in New Orleans,” in *The Sociology of Katrina: Perspectives on a Modern Catastrophe*, ed. David L. Brunsma, David Overfelt, and J. Steven Picou (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2007), 35–49.

because they had important effects on the ground. Three days after the levees collapsed, the governor of Louisiana and the mayor of New Orleans suspended lifesaving operations and ordered emergency responders to concentrate on arresting looters and deterring crime. Sixty-three thousand National Guard troops, many of them fresh from Iraq, were deployed in the so-called war zone of downtown New Orleans. In this unprecedented military operation, citizens of New Orleans were regarded not as disaster victims but as urban insurgents and marauding thugs. Thus Hurricane Katrina was a natural disaster *and* a cultural disaster: a cultural framing of a disaster with disastrous consequences.

I have already quoted Žižek’s remark about the “fictional presence” of disasters on television and in the theater long before they happen in real life. Like Tierney, Žižek pays attention to the functioning of modern disaster discourse:

Something happened that we’ve already seen—where? The scenes we saw on the TV news in the last days cannot but recall a whole series of real life, media and cultural phenomena. . . . It DID already happen in the US: in Hollywood, of course, the *Escape from . . .* series (*Escape from New York*, *Escape from Los Angeles*), in which a US megalopolis is cut off from the domain of public order and criminal gangs take over.³¹

Tierney and Žižek are examples of what has been called a “cultural turn” in modern disaster research.³² Whereas classical sociological disaster researchers restricted themselves to exploring a society’s economic, political, and social infrastructure, recent disaster researchers have begun to acknowledge the importance of the cultural framing of disaster.

In these pages I have tried to supplement this cultural turn with a cultural-historical turn. Kleist’s “Earthquake in Chile” documents that modern disaster discourse has deep historical roots. As I read the short story, Kleist is not just *reacting* to the eighteenth-century debate of the Lisbon earthquake; he is also *constructing* modern disaster discourse. To be more precise, he is contributing to the construction of the subset of modern disaster discourse about vulnerability and resilience. The earthquake story balances on the very threshold between a traditional Christian and a modern secularized disaster discourse.

31. Žižek, “Some Politically Incorrect Reflections.”

32. Gary Webb, “The Popular Culture of Disaster: Exploring a New Dimension of Disaster Research,” in *Handbook of Disaster Research*, ed. Havidán Rodríguez, Enrico L. Quarantelli, and Russel R. Dynes (New York: Springer, 2007), 430–40.

The perspective rotates from the vertical relationship between human being and God to the horizontal relationship between human beings. In other words, the symbolic forms of traditional disaster discourse—first and foremost the dominant symbolic form of theodicy—become secularized and horizontalized in Kleist's story. As in Rousseau and Kant, the secularized theodicy is used as a cognitive scheme for the social imagination of disaster vulnerability and resilience. In the wake of Voltaire, Rousseau, and Kant, Kleist wrote the first piece of vulnerability fiction in Western cultural history.

As several scholars have noted, the cultural repertoire of cognitive schemes underlying modern disaster discourse is surprisingly small and surprisingly stable.³³ In addition to the three symbolic forms relevant to disaster vulnerability and resilience (*theodicy*, *sublime*, *state of emergency*), the dominant symbolic forms of modern disaster discourse are *trauma* (disaster imagined as a shocking event damaging the human psyche), *risk* (disaster imagined as a calculable event to be avoided), *ending* (disaster imagined as an apocalyptic event concluding human history), *imbalance* (disaster imagined as an event caused by an imbalance between human and biophysical system), and *renewal* (disaster imagined as a purifying event preparing the ground for new growth). This repertoire of cognitive schemes demands a cultural-historical turn in disaster research, supplementing the cultural turn triggered by the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon and by Hurricane Katrina. Modern disaster discourse is not just a matter of the latest wars and the latest Hollywood movies, as Tierney and Žižek seem to suggest; it has much deeper historical roots. Metaphors do matter, but some of them have fossilized into symbolic forms that for centuries have structured how we think about disasters and how we act when they strike. As I see it, the task of cultural disaster research is to study the deep grammar of our common imagination of disaster surfacing in fictional as well as in factual disasters. In this cultural-historical approach, a work of disaster fiction is less a testimony representing the hard facts of disaster than a testing ground for the cultural tools we use to understand disaster, a laboratory in which the framework of our cultural disaster management is revealed and reworked. This is why "The Earthquake in Chile" is pivotal rather than anecdotal: in Kleist's highly condensed piece of fiction, we attend the birth of modern disaster discourse out of the spirit of theodicy.

33. See, e.g., Frank Kermode, *The Sense of an Ending: Studies in the Theory of Fiction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1967); Jean Pierre Dupuy, *Petite métaphysique des tsunamis* (Paris: Seuil, 2005); and Kevin Rozario, *The Culture of Calamity: Disaster and the Making of Modern America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007).